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AUTHOR Kerka, Sandra
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INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
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ABSTRACT

In addition to the cult mystique that the notion of self-directed learning (SDL) has attained, controversy has arisen over its definition, its proper environment, and other issues. Consequently, a number of issues have arisen. The first is that adults are naturally self-directed. The reality is that adults' reactions to and capability for SDL vary widely. SDL may be a lifelong phenomenon in which adults differ from other adults and from children in degree: some people are or are not self-directed learners; some people are or are not in different situations. The second myth is that self-direction is an all-or-nothing concept. Again, instead of the extremes of learner- versus other-direction, it is apparent a continuum exists. Adults have varying degrees of willingness or ability to assume personal responsibility for learning. Elements of the continuum may include the degree of choice over goals, objectives, type of participation, content, method, and assessment. The third myth is that self-directed learning means learning in isolation. The essential dimension of SDL may be psychological control, which a learner can exert in solitary, informal, or traditional settings. In other words, solitude is not a necessary condition. Educators seeking to develop the capacity for self-direction in learners will need to consider a number of dimensions: an expanded definition of SDL, SDL as characterized by factors along a continuum, and SDL as involving an internal change in consciousness. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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Myths and Realities

Sandra Kerka

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Myths and REALITIES

by Sandra Kerka *1994*

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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

"In recent years, the notion of self-direction has attained something of a cult status in the literature of adult education" (Candy 1991, p. xiii). In addition to this cult mystique, there is controversy over what self-directed learning (SDL) really means, over whether it takes place only in informal settings or can occur in formal education, over whether the capacity for self-direction can be developed or "taught," over whether it is a means of achieving educational outcomes or an end in itself. Consequently, a number of myths or misconceptions about SDL have arisen. Some of these myths are identified and the reality is explored in this publication.

Myth: Adults Are Naturally Self-Directed

One of the assumptions of Knowles' influential concept of andragogy is that adults desire self-direction and tend to be self-directed as they mature. This assumption is the basis of a great deal of practice because many adult educators identify their role as developing self-directed learners (Caffarella 1993). However, the reality is more complicated. Although Tough and others demonstrated that many adults pursue self-directed learning projects throughout their lifetimes, some adults prefer "other-direction" and others are comfortable with it in certain situations. Adults may exhibit self-direction in their work or personal lives, but not carry it over to a learning situation. Adult educators who expect learners to plan, conduct, and evaluate their own learning are accused by some learners of abdicating their role and responsibility (Candy 1991). Adults' reactions to and capability for SDL vary widely: (1) Love (1991) found that many adult prison inmates had external locus of control (LOC), although SDL is associated with internal LOC; (2) most of Robinson's (1992) open college learners wanted explicit directions and assignments from distance tutors, despite their high intrinsic motivation, also associated with SDL; (3) Dutch adults in van den Berg's (1992) study did not want to design their own learning program; (4) in four studies of corporate training (Richey 1991), SDL was the least-preferred method, although younger and more educated adults were slightly more favorable toward it; and (5) Ellsworth (1992) found that older adults were not necessarily more self-directed, although those with more formal schooling tended to be.

Preference for self-direction may be a matter of degree—a continuum on which a learner's position depends on a number of factors (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991; Brookfield 1986; Ellsworth 1992; Robinson 1992): learning style, exposure to self-direction, familiarity with subject matter, expectations of schooling and learning, motivation, length of time away from formal schooling, social and political context. For example, both professional educators and unemployed adults in courses presented by Usher and Johnston (1988) had been away from formal settings for some time and were initially willing to be directed by teachers. Brookfield (1993) contends that self-direction is affected by the degree of control adults have over their lives as well as the amount of access they have to learning resources. He maintains that "self-directedness—that is, autonomous control over aspects of work life, personal relationships, societal structures, and educational pursuits" is rare (Brookfield 1986, p. 94). Jarvis (in Long 1990) agrees that self-direction may be the exception rather than the rule in contemporary society.

Related to the notion that adults are naturally self-directed is the myth that "children must be taught, whereas adults can learn for themselves" (Candy 1991, p. 44). Although andragogy may support the idea of self-direction as a uniquely adult phenomenon, some suggest that children are naturally curious and internally motivated to pursue learning but that they are socialized to be dependent and passive by the way much of their educational experience is structured (Eisenman in Long 1990). Rather than asserting that all adults are self-directed and that self-direction is a hallmark of adulthood, it may be fairer to say that SDL is a lifelong phenomenon in which adults differ from other adults and from children in degree: some people are or are not self-directed learners; some people are or are not in different situations.

Myth: Self-Direction Is an All-or-Nothing Concept

SDL is sometimes taken to mean that learning is *either* directed by the learner *or* directed by others. In many attempts to define the term, the chief characteristic of SDL is that the learner is wholly in control of learning processes—planning, carrying out, and evaluating learning. In this view, SDL is a learner-controlled instructional process that would seem incompatible with formal educational settings. On the other hand, SDL can be viewed as a personal attribute instead of a set of instructional techniques, characterized by the internal change in consciousness that results from critical reflection upon the learning process (Brookfield 1986; Garrison 1992), regardless of the setting. Candy (1991) states that learner control can take place both in formal and informal settings, but it differs.

Again, instead of the extremes of learner- vs. other-direction, it is apparent that a continuum exists. Adults have varying degrees of willingness or ability to assume personal responsibility for learning (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991). There may be personality types that cannot handle self-direction, or else people have not developed this capacity (Harris 1989). Responsibility for acquiring knowledge may be shared by accepting the guidance and support of others, but the learner retains responsibility to make sense of new information and structure that knowledge so it is personally meaningful (Jarvis in Long 1990). A self-directed learner in an institutional setting may exert control by giving attention or emphasis to selected objectives or by questioning or challenging assumptions (Long 1990). Adults may undertake their own learning projects to avoid institutional constraints, or they may deliberately enroll

in planned programs (Candy 1991). Within a single learning project, they may alternate between other- and self-direction (Brookfield 1986).

Elements of the continuum may include the degree of choice over goals, objectives, type of participation, content, method, and assessment. A learner's place on the continuum is influenced by the level of skill, familiarity with the subject, sense of personal competence as a learner, and the learning context (Caffarella 1993). Ultimately, each learner develops an individual pattern of formal, informal, and casual learning methods.

Myth: Self-Directed Learning Means Learning in Isolation

Closely related to the all-or-nothing notion is the image of the solitary learner or "intellectual Robinson Crusoe" (Moore cited in Brookfield 1986). Certainly, some SDL is conducted on one's own in the library, at a computer, or watching a video. But this image neglects the vast amount of SDL that takes place in informal social networks, such as learning to cook, quilt, or repair a car from peers, community experts, or fellow learners. Long (1989) believes the essential dimension of SDL is psychological control, which a learner can exert either in solitary, informal, or traditional institutional settings. In other words, solitude is not a necessary condition.

On the contrary, many writers assert that "no act of learning is fully self-directed if this is taken to mean that the learner is so self-reliant that he or she can exclude all external sources or stimuli" (Brookfield 1986, p. 48). There is a bit of a contradiction here: humans are all independent learners in the sense that people individually process information and relate it to their unique experiences to make personal meaning of it. However, learning is increasingly being viewed as meaning that is personally constructed *within a social or cultural context* (Candy 1991). "Self-direction should not be viewed as the ultimate goal or state of an adult learner" (Garrison 1992, p. 142), because this limits learning to isolated forms. The learner is neither independent or dependent, but interdependent, forming new understanding through dialogue, feedback, and reflection with fellow learners and facilitators.

Garrison argues that SDL requires the collaboration of a competent facilitator, even outside of institutional settings, for example, in the provision of distance education through technologies that link formal with "natural" societal settings. Brookfield (1993) also cautions against a view of SDL as "self-contained, volitional beings scurrying around in individual projects" (p. 239), because this encourages emphasis on self-sufficiency and denies the importance of collective action. The assumption that self-direction, individuation, and autonomy are marks of adulthood is also being challenged by research on gender and cultural differences, from which is emerging support for connectedness, interdependence, and relationships as equally valid ways of thinking and learning (Caffarella 1993).

Conclusion

What can safely be said about self-directed learning? "Self-direction is at once a social and psychological construct, a philosophical ideal, and a literal impossibility; an external manifestation and an internal tendency; both the beginning and the end of lifelong learning; the foundation stone and the keystone of the learning society; a supplement to and a substitute for the formal education system; simultaneously a process and a product, a precondition and a purpose" (Candy 1991, p. 424). Educators seeking to develop the capacity for self-direction in learners will need to consider a number of dimensions:

- SDL can be a self-initiated process of planning and managing learning, an attribute or characteristic, or a way of organizing instruction in formal settings to allow learner control (Caffarella 1993).
- SDL is characterized by the following factors (which can be thought of as continua on which learners are situated): personal autonomy, self-management, learner control in formal settings, and individual pursuit in informal settings (Candy 1991).
- SDL involves an internal change in consciousness that is most complete when instructional processes are combined with critical reflection (Brookfield 1986).

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CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 Kenny Road • Columbus, Ohio 43210-1090